Early Learning is a Smart Investment

By Elizabeth Whitehouse

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High-quality early learning programs have been shown to boost educational outcomes for children, reduce rates of incarceration and lower health-care costs, according to research from economist James Heckman, winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.

“Quality early childhood programs for children from low-income families have been proven to yield a significant return on investment,” said Heckman. “In fact, every dollar invested in quality early childhood development for disadvantaged children produces a $7 to $10 return, per child, per year through better education, health, social and economic outcomes and the reduced need for social spending.”

Heckman presented at last year’s Midwestern Legislative Conference, or MLC, at the request of Wisconsin state Rep. Joan Ballweg, the 2016 MLC chair. Ballweg said her time working on children’s issues in the Legislature has shown her the benefits of quality child care firsthand.

“It was almost six years ago when Wisconsin first lady Tonette Walker asked me to be a part of her Fostering Futures Initiative, and since then early childhood issues have been a main focus of my efforts in the Legislature,” said Ballweg. “Now, I serve as a member of the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board and Committee on Children and Families, and I am a co-chair of the Wisconsin Legislative Children’s Caucus. Through these efforts I have learned how high-quality child care, even at a very young age, sets the foundation for their lifelong success.”

State leaders across the country are working to make high-quality learning a possibility for all children, and gaining long-term benefits in their states, while at the same time managing the ever-rising costs for families. In the past few years, many states have pursued updating or creating Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, or TQRIS, for early learning programs.

TQRIS programs implement a process for promoting high quality early learning programs through the establishment of key elements that show quality, set measurements of quality at each tier of the system, and incorporate training and consultation assistance for early learning community providers to move up through the tiers.

When going out to eat, it is easy to see the health department rating of restaurants to be able to tell if it was a clean, safe place to go, but until recently it was difficult for parents to see any rating of the quality of child care centers. Many states are leading the way in showing families the quality of early care and education programs through these tiered quality rating and improvement systems.

“Massachusetts is implementing an innovative high-quality program model through the federal Preschool Expansion Grant and the early results of this initiative are very promising,” said Tom Weber, Massachusetts’ early education and care commissioner. “We are continuing to invest in program quality supports such as the Preschool Expansion Grant program and our state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System because we know that high-quality early education and care opportunities provide children with a strong foundation for learning and
One resource for state leaders in developing or analyzing their early care and education system is the BUILD Initiative. BUILD works with early childhood leaders within states and nationally to better prepare young children to thrive and succeed. The Early Childhood Funders Collaborative created the BUILD Initiative over a decade ago as a catalyst for change and a national resource on early childhood development and policy.

According to Susan Hibbard, executive director of the BUILD Initiative, “The U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant provided states the funding and the mandate to advance the infrastructure for early learning quality improvement. TQRIS were initially built on child care licensing standards to improve quality and raise the floor. Today, the states leading the way in terms of quality improvement are promoting school readiness, promoting continuous quality improvement and working across child care, Head Start and pre-Kindergarten.”

Hibbard cites California as an example of a state using TQRIS to increase involvement in high-quality early learning programs. “California has focused on making sure the system is user friendly—this is important because complex systems can be too burdensome for providers and can be a disincentive to participation.”

Hibbard said Washington is also leading the nation in this arena. Washington’s Early Achievers program has created a frame of quality for all its early learning efforts. Washington leaders have been able to integrate pre-Kindergarten into the system and have, like California, worked hard to support the cultural and language diversity of the providers, families and young children.

Early care and education for children was a CSG 2017 Top 5 Issue in education. Please visit the CSG Knowledge Center at knowledgecenter.csg.org for research on early childhood education including information on program quality, affordability, access, professional development and funding.

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